

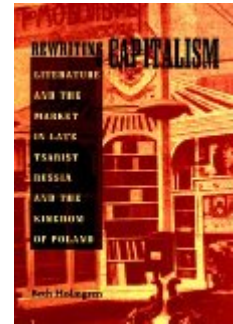
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Beth Holmgren. *Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. xviii + 240 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5679-2; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4075-3.

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Reconciling Art and the Market in Russia and Poland

In this ambitious examination of the impact of capitalism on Russian and Polish literature at turn-of-the-century, Beth Holmgren has produced a timely, original, insightful and accessible book. An associate professor of Russian and Polish literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Holmgren exploits not only the tools of her own trade in appraising the relationship between literature and the market, but those of the intellectual and cultural historian as well. Moreover, Holmgren's history is usable as it affords relevant comparisons with the recently restored market-driven literature of the 1990s. A wide range of readers will derive any number of insights from this concise, sophisticated, and engaging work.

Industrial capitalism's first wave had indeed come to Imperial Russia and its subjected territory of the Kingdom of Poland by the last decades of the nineteenth century, resulting in a rapid and painful transformation of traditional agrarian societies. Adjustment to new sets of social and economic relations defined by the market proved difficult in most, if not all instances. As castle-like social structures eroded due to greater mobility demanded by the market and as literacy ceased to be the preserve of elites, an emerging mass-circulation press both represented and shaped a new consumer culture. Within a comparative framework, Holmgren attempts to discern how the "serious," highbrow, and elitist Russian and Polish literary traditions adapted to a developing modern mass culture, whether the new literary marketplace produced an approximation of the Western

"middlebrow," and how in the new circumstances literary products were marketed by Russian and Polish publishing industries.

This is a tall order indeed, but Holmgren succeeds admirably in filling most of it. On the Russian side, she concedes that her task has been made easier by Western historians of Russian popular culture while chiding fellow literary scholars who "remain in thrall to high culture's legislation of literary value" (p. xiv). Major works by Jeffrey Brooks on literacy and popular literature,[1] Louise McReynolds on the mass-circulation press,[2] and Laura Engelstein on the contested terrain of sexuality in fin-de-siecle Russian culture[3] are used by Holmgren to map out her territory. She is less certain of her Polish ground. While studies of Polish popular literature are as limited in scale as Holmgren claims, she would have done well to consult Jerzy Jedlicki's work on the nineteenth-century Polish intelligentsia's discourse over "civilization"[4], where she would have discovered an excellent discussion of elite cultural responses to the prospect of capitalism before it became an actual part of Polish landscape. Stephen D. Corrsin's work on turn-of-the-century Warsaw,[5] which contains a good deal of information on literacy and the mass-circulation press in Poland's publishing capital, would have been useful as well. In the absence of these and other sources, Holmgren makes some avoidable errors. For instance, she grossly inflates Polish literacy rates, when in reality at approximately 30 percent they were lower than those prevailing in European Russia, due mainly to a "colonial" and financially-starved

system of primary education. Nevertheless, such gaps affect the backdrop of Holmgren's analysis rather than her arguments as such, which are based on well-chosen examples.

"Serious" literature was the domain of the Russian and Polish intelligentsia whose writers enjoyed tremendous authority as self-styled social and national missionaries. Especially in the Russian tradition, the intelligentsia's literary heroes came from its own ranks and were characterized by altruism and intellectuality. Merchants, as purveyors of material goods, had a "marginalized and frequently ambiguous image" in the bulk of "serious" nineteenth-century Russian literature (p. 18). If the merchant was allowed to become a hero, according to Holmgren, it was only "by stepping directly into the shoes of the affluent intelligentsia" (p. 33). In the Kingdom of Poland, on the other hand, the image of the merchant was tarnished by hybrid ethnicity, as Germans and Jews traditionally competed with and actually outnumbered Poles as dealers of merchandise. The movement of part of the traditional merchantry into the ranks of industrial entrepreneurs and patrons of the arts, as well as the emergence of a new generation of "serious" writers, modified but did not supplant these established images. In examining the fin-de-siecle works of Russians Maxim Gorky and Anton Chekhov, themselves the "articulate sons" of tradesmen, and of the Pole Boleslaw Prus, Holmgren argues that these "serious" writers "seemed to sense the cultural impossibility of the capitalist hero" (p. 180). Prus's capitalist characters in *The Doll* are as intent on maintaining their nobility of spirit, defined as a Polish national trait, as they are on amassing fortunes in a "misalliance of idealism and materialism" (p. 61). While both Gorky and Chekhov rejected traditional stereotypes based on estate or class distinctions, including the intelligentsia's own heroic self-image, they also refused to embrace Russia's embryonic middle. Consequently, in Holmgren's view, "serious" literature displayed a remarkable resiliency, mounting a powerful and complex self-defense against capitalist revaluation.

But what of the Russian and Polish "middlebrow" literature? While a coherent middle class had yet to emerge in Russia and Poland, an array of diverse and fragmented groups held sufficient numbers to comprise an eager audience for a writers of hybrid works that bridged "serious" and popular literature and were connected to the market, both in terms of sales and themes of consumption. Moreover, a market-proven formula was ready at hand: the popular romance, which had done much to define the "middlebrow" in the West. Holm-

gren's comparative analysis of Anastasia Verbitskaia's *The Keys to Happiness* (featured also in the aforementioned scholarly works of Brooks and Engelstein) and Helena Mniszek's *The Leper* reveals some interesting variations on the classical romance theme. Both were widely popular, both were dismissed by "serious" critics (despite the homage paid to big ideas and issues characteristic of "serious" literature), both sanctioned the new commodity culture and a "cult of personality" (p. 98) that dovetailed into unprecedented assertions of individualism, especially female. Yet just as their "serious" counterparts, Gorky, Chekhov and Prus, stopped short of endowing men and women of the middle with a positive image, so too Verbitskaia and Mniszek rewrote the classical popular romance to suit the cultural context of their audiences. Their heroines do not find bourgeois happy endings, but instead become martyrs to an unsatisfactory status quo, though differently perceived, in Russia and Poland. According to Holmgren, "middlebrow" literatures which took themselves seriously, like "serious" literature itself, rewrote capitalist role models and values in order to retain the distinctive cultural worth of their products.

In the second part of her book, Holmgren takes a closer look at the mass-circulation press which "blatantly transubstantiated the printed word from semisacred text into a made and paid-for product accessible to everyone" (p. 118). For her case studies, Holmgren focuses on the *Vol'f Bookstore News*, essentially a catalogue which trailblazed innovative modes of marketing Russian literature, and *The Illustrated Weekly*, considered the standard-bearer of the period's Polish illustrated journals. From Holmgren's comparison of the two publications, the similarities appear more striking than the differences. *Vol'f Bookstore News* advertised books as if they were icons, replete with detailed instructions regarding their care and maintenance. *The Illustrated Weekly* conferred secular sainthood on contemporary Polish literary "greats" such as Henryk Sienkiewicz and Eliza Orzeszkowa, enjoining the reader/consumer to patronize their art as a patriotic duty. Both anticipated "the consumption of celebrity" (p. 131). And both catered to their readers' cultural sensitivities, *Vol'f* by promoting material book culture "as a mean to imperial greatness and a sign of imperial prowess" (p. 149), *The Illustrated Weekly* by offering its mass readership a "surrogate nation-space" (p. 151).

For Holmgren then, the reconciliation of art and the market in Russia and Poland involved rewriting market influence "so as to broaden deeply rooted cultural patterns" (p. 180). She concludes by comparing the com-

mercualization of literature in the 1890s with that of a century later following the collapse of communism. In the early 1990s, it appeared that “serious” literature had lost its reason for existence in both countries as consumers, once again made sovereign, abjured the politicized literary traditions, whether official or unofficial, of the recent past. However, as the decade continued, “serious” literature began to make something of a comeback, occupying a more specialized market niche. Holmgren suspects that this smaller self-selecting scale will nevertheless exceed Western proportions as writers and publishers take greater pains to assert national cultural models.

This reviewer sees no reason to challenge such a conclusion. In February, 1999, I bore witness to a Polish national spectacle, the release of Jerzy Hoffman’s film version of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Of Fire and Sword*. Corporate sponsorship, slick advertising, and considerable media hype transformed the film’s premiere into a patriotic event as enterprising ticket-scalpers greeted the faithful at the box office. I was reminded of Holmgren’s analysis of the Sienkiewicz jubilee of 1900 as it appeared in the pages of *The Illustrated Weekly*, in particular, its “commodification of the artist’s person, life style and work” (pp. 163-64). Soon Adam Mickiewicz’s classic, *Pan Tadeusz*, will be rendered unto film by Andrzej Wajda, and it is already being neatly packaged for mass consumption. Ultimately, the questionable artistic quality of these “blockbusters” matters less than their reaffirmation of Holmgren’s main argument about the market’s skillful accommodation of high culture notions of the writer and

his or her message.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1985).

[2]. Louise McReynolds, *The News Under Russia’s Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[3]. Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[4]. Jerzy Jedlicki, *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebuja* (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1988). Jedlicki’s book has recently been translated by the author into English as *A Suburb of Europe: Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999).

[5]. Stephen D. Corrsin, *Warsaw Before the First World War: Poles and Jews in the Third City of the Russian Empire, 1880-1914* (Boulder, Col.: East European Monographs. 1989).

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